

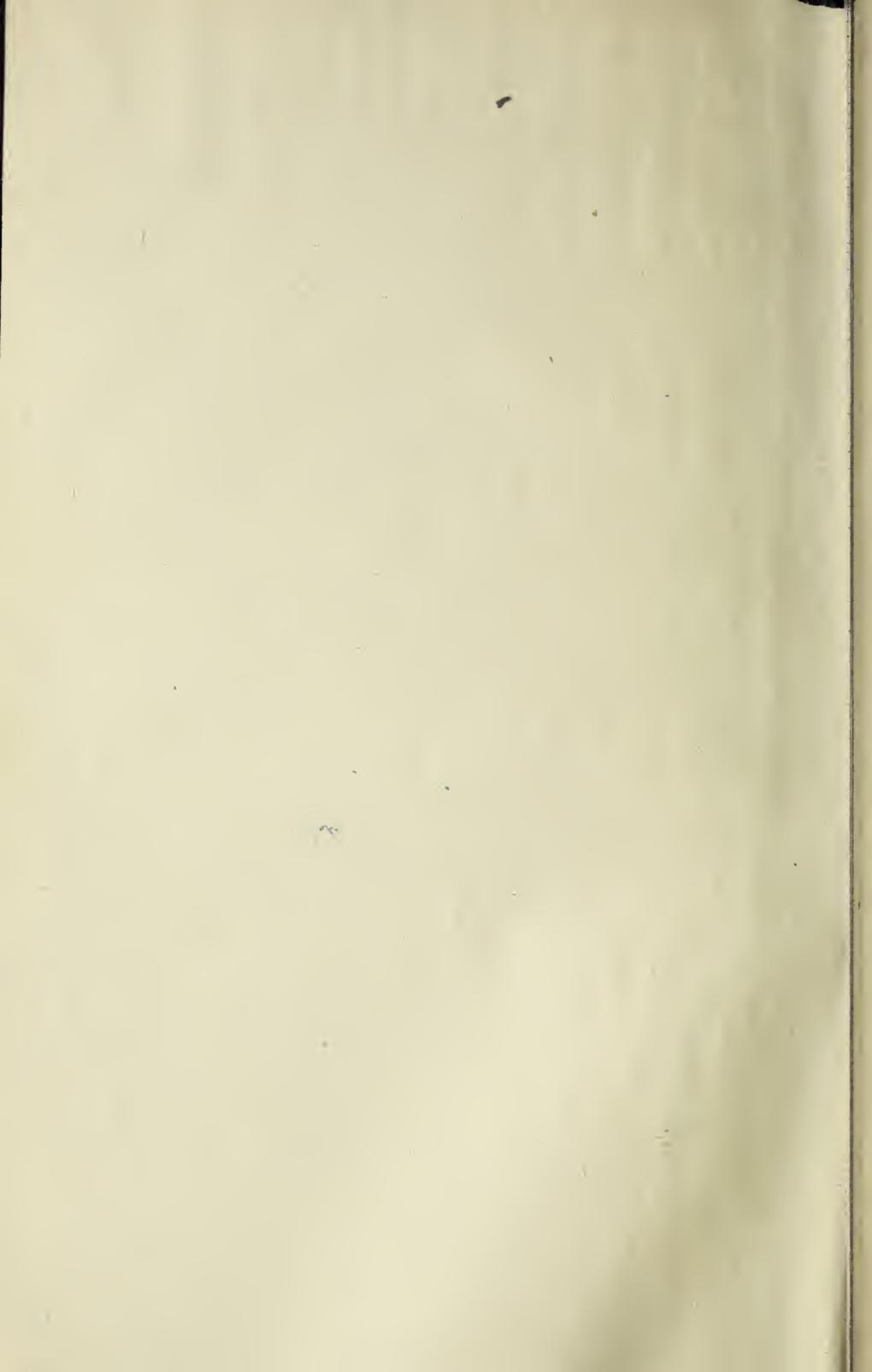
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# THE IDEAL COMMONWEALTH

AND ITS

## REALIZATION.

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### A SERMON

DELIVERED ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22D, 1882, IN THE FIRST  
UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA,

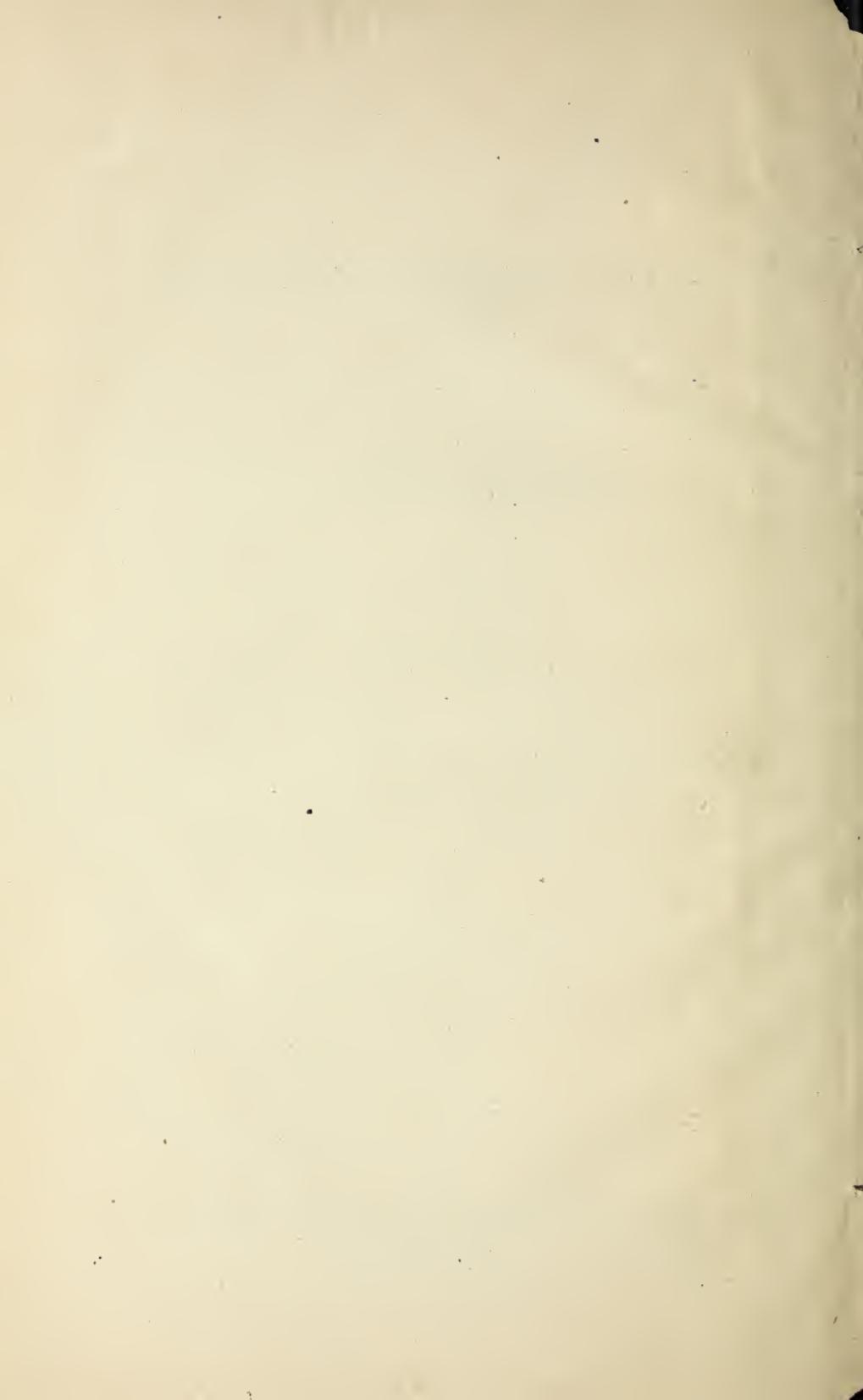
BY

JOSEPH MAY,

MINISTER OF THE CHURCH.

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# THE IDEAL COMMONWEALTH AND ITS REALIZATION.

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them ; and the desert shall rejoice and bloom as the rose."—Isaiah, xxxv. ii.

Perennially strange is the romantic influence of lapsing time ! Like the sun among floating dust, it gilds commonest things with a glory not their own, and interests us in smallest details of centuries gone, while corresponding things of to-day we pass by with not a thrill of emotion.

What is the reason of this ?

Carlyle compares Time to the poet, who has the art to invest the finite with infinitude ; who "by intensity of conception, by that gift of transcendental thought which is fitly named genius and inspiration, can enoble the actual into idealness." But his explanation itself requires explaining perhaps. What is it to make the actual ideal, to bring out the infinite element in the finite ? Is it not merely to discover and bring to view the *truth* that is lodged in everything that has reality ? Some things in life, as the mere vital processes and necessities, are below poetry, for they belong wholly to the outward. Whatsoever can be made poetical must have an eternal

element in it, that is, it must have truth, moral significance in it. Now from the things remote by the long process of tradition, and the rough handling inseparable from this, the outer, the merely temporal element, is stripped partly. A multitude of external accessories are lost out of view, and only the substance of the event or act is preserved to us, in which substance, and making it substance, is the truth of the event contained, which so we are able to see; the more as in reference to long past things our eyes themselves are clearer from prejudice and prepossession.

But with present matters this is not so. Here the truth is deeply overlaid by its accessories and accidents, it has been as yet neither threshed or winnowed; it has been not yet interpreted by succeeding events and issues, and finally we are all of us, besides being thus untaught by facts, full of preconceptions and partisanship, the sport so largely of our temperaments and education. So we discern only the worthless temporal envelope, and not the everlasting kernel. We feel the prose, the insipidity, and it is impossible for us to do more. Only some prophet, some *vates*, prophet and poet in one, can do more than this usually. Even when, as in our late war, we know we are living in great times, few can see the poetry because few really feel the truth of them. That is the reason the war produced so little poetry—only one piece worth naming and that a woman's. For, after all, its deepest issues were but dimly apprehended by the masses. And the day when mere soldiering could deeply inspire men had gone by. The comparatively trivial factious

strifes of the Stuart era in England produced a crop of lyrics which can hardly die, because the men were so in earnest for the truth, such as it was, which they were fighting for. Our magnificent struggle gave birth, as I say, to nothing worth the name. The well, at the bottom of which our truth lay, was too deep. A century hence will see it, and then the poetry will come out in fact if not in form.

I incline to think something of this is true in regard to *all* our American past. No science has been so ill and clumsily taught as history; the husks and shells forever offered; the spirit, the truth left unregarded and cast aside. We are taught in youth dates and places and men's names; what really happened, what men *did*, what events established and helped along we do not learn. We hear the noises of drums and trumpets and the din of battle; but the seed of truth, like all others, springs up noiselessly, and we do not hear or see it growing under the feet of the trampling hosts. So although this is an era of anniversaries and celebratings, centennials and bi-centennials, there has been, to my mind, a hollowness in the apparent joy, and more real interest in the festivities themselves than in the events they commemorate. I fear this will even be more true of the fete which is now approaching than of that of six years ago. There was a clear and tangible issue recalled before us then; not a very profound one in itself some have thought, yet its issues were, through the grace of circumstances, great and momentous. Political independence is a thought easy to grasp, a desire easy to establish in men's hearts. Cæsar himself bears witness that it is

a yearning germane and native to all men's hearts *to be free*. But the suggestion, the hidden meaning, the truth, which informed the outward founding of this Commonwealth, although of an order parallel, was deeper and more refined. Perhaps it was less distinctly grasped. Perhaps, too, men really value it less, abstractly. When freedom of opinion is invaded, the exercise of thought forbidden, there are always found those who will hazard and surrender much for it, will even go to the stake for it; but when attained in their own cases the majority seldom so appreciate its beauty and preciousness that they diligently vindicate it for those who differ from themselves in the details of thought to which mental independence brings them.

William Penn's ideal of a State, which he had before him in the founding of this Commonwealth, was unquestionably of the very highest. I think he was himself a great man; if not a great man of the first order, still truly great. He who is such, it has been said, "belongs to his age even more than other men, being properly the epitome and synopsis of his age, with its interests and influences; but belongs likewise to all ages, otherwise he is not great." Certainly this canon remains true of Penn in both its branches. He was very fairly an epitome of his time, of which the significant movement, the characteristic, vital idea, was that two-sided one of personal and mental independence. Cromwell had come and gone, indeed, his sun setting in a cloud. But a cloud to last only a night, for the idea of liberty, no new one to the British heart, was not quenched in the vile and foolish era of Charles II or the

fatuous reign of James II, only resting a little, and not even that, after the struggle of the greater age before. It was still the burden of the best, the most real English thought and hope ; indeed it always has been from remotest times a plant indigenous in that little island. In Penn's day the Quakers were by no means practically its best friends, nor most effective servants, but rather the other non-conformists of the Puritan stripe, who would make no terms with a royal dissembler, despised his insincere professions of the liberal principle in religion, and upheld the Test Act as a real bulwark of freedom of conscience. Yet Penn, the intimate of two dissolute kings, whose characteristic ideas and purposes (especially James's) were exactly antagonistic, held unwaveringly to all the best ideals of personal independence. He was a true Englishman in this.

But he was something more than an Englishman ; he approached the type which afterwards drew much of its life from the idealistic soil of France, and made its appearance rather on ours—the Jefferson type—for he loved liberty not merely as the practical fact, the actual right of particular citizens, which was more the English and Puritan way, but he loved it as an abstraction, an idea, and as such, before there was a community to enjoy it, delighted at the thought of providing for its realization. But besides this principle of *political* freedom, this idealist entered early in life into that other, of which the Quakers were the extreme representatives, of religious and mental freedom. There is something inexpressibly pathetic, it seems to me, in such popular uprisings as that of Quakerism ; wherein

you see the Truth in its majesity and force and vitality, when flouted and denied among the seeming great ones, and in the church which should be its sanctuary, coming into the hearts of the ignorant and obscure, men who hardly knew how to interpret it and so run into vagary and grotesqueness, yet who are overfilled with it, love it, accept it, humbly listen, and in a groping way try faithfully to carry it out in their own lives and to the hearts of other men. That poor leather-clad cobbler, George Fox, his little vessel spilling with his thought of reality in worship and morals, of the divinity in man audient, ever and momentarily, of the word from the Infinite Divine, plodding through the muddy lanes, sleeping in barns and under hayricks, wet by day and cold by night, refusing doles, fearless of consequences and of men, that he may but reach the hearts of his fellows with his truth, and call them from conventional ways to a true worship and a real morality,—I say this humble figure, full of zeal, full of courage, takes his place beside St. Paul. And the men who listened to him, here and there some tender hearted man or woman of position; once or twice a true priest; above all, in almost every sense, he who became the founder of this Commonwealth, but mainly the humbler sort, to whom the words of Fox brought mental bewilderment along with spiritual stir and uprising, these all will touch kind hearts forever with sympathy, and sensitive ones with rebuke also. Nowadays we seem to lack something in having no stakes or jails to go to for our faiths. New truth is almost losing the crown of unpopularity in these hospitable days.

William Penn, I say, was in the fullest measure a type also of this other kind of liberty, the spiritual, which early Quakerism presented in the most extreme and abstract form that had been heard of up to his day, and almost ever since.

And it is most interesting to see how the entrance into his mind of this idea and spirit of moral independence inspired him to see truth. As in some of his political utterances he anticipated by a hundred years the "*blazing ubiquties*" as Emerson called them, of our Declaration of Independence, so there is hardly anything to be added or modified in his expressions on religious topics. They have the most modern sound conceivable, and equally anticipate almost the extremest claims of the liberalist of the present day.

In his "Address to Protestants of all persuasions" in 1679, he enumerates several great errors of his day, of which two are these. 1st. That of making opinious articles of faith, and of making them at the same time the bond of Christian Communon. Here his objections to *creeds* are as searching and emphatic as words could make them. You would think Dr. Channing was speaking. "They set the head at work," he says, "but not the heart, and what Christ most insisted on is least concerned in this sort of Christianity, for it is opinion, not obedience, notion not regeneration which is aimed at." "It had been happy for the world if there had been no other creeds than those Christ and his apostles gave and left, and it is not the least argument against their being needful to Christ's Communion that Christ and his apostles did not think them so."

Consistently with these strong words, the second error he condemns is that of *debasing the true value of morality, under the pretence of higher things.* "It is the custom," he says, (and I wish his words may ring and penetrate certain quarters to day) "it is the custom to decry men of moral lives because they are not of a particular faith." He reprobates in strongest terms this custom. He ridicules the notion that a man who repeats his creed by heart is sure of being within the pale of salvation, however profane his life, while another is denied it, though his life is upright, "*if he happens not to be well skilled in what may be called the mysteries of the Christian religion.*" They who so maintain deny, he says, that morality is part of Christianity; they "mistake the end of Christ's coming, which was as St. Paul says, to deliver men from actual sinning; to redeem them from all iniquity."

Alas, that such words were not only far in advance of Penn's own age, but still rebuke the utterances of the largest section of the popular church.

Again, how far he was beyond his age, and abreast even of the present, he showed in 1674, when he maintained *the absolute secularity of government*, and claimed that "*Religion under any modification or church government was no part of the old English Constitution*" but that "*to live honestly, to injure not another but to give every one his due, entitled every native to the privileges of an Englishman.*"

Finally how profound these convictions were, he showed in 1681, when he expressed the fundamental principles of his new government in these immortal words: "In reverence to God, the Father of light and spirits, the author as well as the object of all divine

knowledge, faith and worship, I do, for me and mine, declare and establish for the first fundamental of the government of my province, that every person who shall reside therein, shall enjoy the free profession of his or her faith, and exercise and worship toward God in such way and manner as every such person shall in conscience believe is most acceptable to God. And as long as every such person useth not this Christian liberty to licentiousness or the destruction of others, to speak loosely or profanely or contemptuously of God, the Holy Scriptures, or religion, \* \* \* he or she shall be protected in the aforesaid Christian liberty by the civil magistrate."

I cannot refuse the title of *great* to the man who could write and enact sentences like those, two hundred years ago! It is idle to question the sincerity of convictions so expressed, and with which he was entirely consistent in the whole spirit of his life and language from the days even of youth and as long as he lived. He had been suffering for them all his life, when his social relations offered him the most easy and prosperous career had he denied them. In the establishment of the Jerseys, he had incorporated them, and when the opportunity offered of founding a new and greater colony, it was with an ardor unquestionably genuine that he embraced it, to realize in its constitution these most advanced principles. There could be no more affecting confirmation of this—were one wanting—than was exhibited in his treatment of the Indians; in which he mingled the tenderness of a parent with the equal respect and justice of man to brother man, conduct which had never before been thought of, and which after two centuries of cruelty

and bloodshed this great nation is only now beginning to imitate.

Midway between Penn and us, Pennsylvania's greatest though adopted citizen, a man of practicality in the extreme, a man of the world, though in the best sense, a moralist, an economist, not an idealist, a hater of cant, naturally enough had something of an repulsion from such a character. Franklin was the typical Puritan in these qualities ; and although he held to the full the original Quaker idea of spiritual liberty and carried its interpretations beyond Penn, could not abide a *doctrinaire* such as Penn seemed to him to be, nor have patience with his abstractions. So he sneers at the idealist, whose capacity for practical affairs he evidently doubted and somewhat despised. Speaking of Penn's original frame of government for Pennsylvania, he says, " At the head of it is a short preliminary discourse which serves to give us a more lively idea of William Penn preaching in Grace Church Street, than we derive from Raphael's cartoon, of Paul preaching at Athens. As a man of conscience he sets out ; as a man of reason he proceeds ; and as a man of the world he offers the most plausible conditions to all, to the end that he might gain some." It is incredible that one such hearty lover of freedom could so flout another. But even so, Franklin is compelled immediately to add that " two paragraphs of this discourse, the people of Pennsylvania ought to have forever before their eyes, to wit: 1st. "Any government is free to the people (whatever be its frame) where the laws rule and the people are a party to those laws. And more than this is tyranny, oligarchy, and confusion.

2d. To support power in reverence with the people, and to secure the people from the abuse of power; that the people may be free by their just obedience, and the magistrates honorable for their just administration, are the great end of all government."

Well might the grand old cynic praise words like these! he never himself wrote any more comprehensive, more suggestive, more true, or more simple.

Of the merits of the questions which so soon arose between Penn and his colonists; of the perplexities into which he was thrown, of obstacles to his visions and opposition to his efforts, this is not the place to speak, and it is, perhaps, hard now anywhere to judge. I see in them, chiefly, an illustration of the difficulty with which the ideal is always beset in its attempts to become real. Start with any noble ideal, and how at once a crop of practical objects are sprung upon you by "the men of this generation," as Jesus called them, who are always so much wiser, *at this transition point*, than the children of light. Objections usually, which need not exist if only all men were ideal, or even unselfish; but they are *not*, and this is the thing the man of the world knows best and sees first. So I am not surprised, though it were true, as Franklin further says with his rude incisiveness, that "when the scene of action was shifted from the mother country to this, the deportment of the legislator was shifted too. *Less of the man of God now appeared, and more of the man of the world.*" Do you remember how Moses, that early man of God, felt and acted when he came down for Mt. Sinai? So Penn who, like him, had in his retirement at home, smoothly drawn up his utopian framework,

naturally struck upon practical snags and shoals when he came here to launch it. He doubtless lacked the wisdom and tact of Franklin and was possibly wanting in that *fibre*, which is the remarkable character of the Puritan type. He was deficient, I judge, in the power of reading and of controlling *men*. He was compelled to be arbitrary while professing perfect liberality; he had to feel his way, trying experiments and changing plans, and so gave offence and handles to his enemies. It is a result of defective political skill, to become inconsistent and to seem insincere. So he was accused of artifice, and of many selfish motives. He was full of business troubles, and was largely obliged to direct affairs from home, then indefinitely further away than it is now. He acted too much through others. Finally, with all his ideals and abstractions, he was accustomed to the methods of arbitrary governing; he felt himself the owner of the province, although he so nobly purposed to give it to a free community; and these things made him sometimes arbitrary. Indeed, it soon appeared as was natural, that the men of the province itself, who had already breathed the air of freedom, and known it in the concrete, understood it and even valued it, better than the idealist himself. To give symmetry in a dream's accomplishment, the dreamer has often been willing to lop it, or mould it, here and there.

But all the objections that have been made appear as small deductions from the greatness and breadth of Penn's purpose; nor has there perhaps ever entered any man's mind and heart one grander, or more generous and gracious. Witness one smallest

but most significant detail. I doubt if into the fundamental constitution of any community on earth there ever before or since entered the short word "*she*." More wrote his Utopia, Sidney his Arcadia, Harrington (to whom Franklin likens Penn), his Oceana. Penn had the wonderful opportunity of *realizing* such a dream as these. Would either idealist have succeeded better?

What shall we say of the actual issue of Penn's dream? I wonder what he would say, if he knows it, and we could call upon him? At least, he must confess, were he here, that wonderfully prescient as he was, capable of the largest expectations as all his plans show, yet far beyond anything he could then conceive, "the desert has rejoiced and blossomed as the rose." It was a bold stroke then, to lay out a city a mile long and stretching from river to river, and place its centre where he did, a mile from either stream. His idealism shows itself in his planning it all according to a type in his own mind, following no ancient pattern, and not leaving it as did the Puritans at Boston, and the Dutchmen at New York, to grow as nature and self-interest should guide it. And still, its main defect (saving the angularity he gave it) comes from his original plan not having grown with the growth of his capital, since it exceeded his utmost boundaries.

What a pleasing picture he had in mind! Broad streets coming fairly down to the river; broad house-lots, each with its dwelling in the middle, with its lawn and trees; here and there a meeting-house,—alas, without a steeple to break the outline, point heavenward and give a welcome to the Sabbath

morning, such as used to swell from the chimes of his English home.

But how could he have imagined what we see to-day? An area, I know not how many times greater, packed with life; the green lawns gone, and unsightly brick lanes in place of his broad and open ways. Noise and bustle; filth which only heaven's deluges can purge; chimneys by thousands sending up their wasteful incense of smoke, witnessing to the million of manufactured wealth each day added to the world's stock;—the outward scene is an unbeautiful contrast, perhaps.

But how much which he would rejoice in! Abundance, comfort, convenience, health, culture, progress, typified in a thousand instruments of service and provisions for human life of which the remotest vision could not have come to him. And beyond, over the vast expanding state, farms rich from generations of culture; cattle on a thousand hills; mines, mills and happy homes.

The real beauty of human life has always to be seen through the rubbish and exuviae it casts aside as it develops. The first effect of man's coming among the scenes of untamed nature is to blot and scar it. He cuts down the trees, defiles the streams, estranges the timid, trustful beasts, and mars all the beauty and wild dignity he encounters. How magnificent in their virgin, silent freshness, rolled the great Delaware and Schuylkill when only the ineffectual savage skirted their banks! On their green shores the unassaulted forests, fulfilling nature's term and dropping only under the stroke of age or lightning, to moulder moss-grown and make new

soil for their successors! The grass waved and the flowers twinkled and all was clean and fair. But how useless! how devoid of significance! It was when men—that *were* men—came, smote the trees, trampled grass and blossoms, woke up the sleeping soil, and planted something besides crops, that the earth ceased to be mere clay, and the trees mere timber, and the land began to live; began to have *moral being*; began to have *history*. As body without spirit, is the world without man. *Things* have their apotheosis when they are absorbed, even by their outward destruction, into his career. Civilization is nature developed and interpreted. And of all the subjects of human thought, nothing earthly is so impressive as a great organized community of human souls, such as here began to be two centuries ago! As accumulated *force*—original power massed and operative—it is the highest symbol and suggestion of divine power, which is not reflected best in the rush of winds or waters, or even in chained and circling stars, but in directing, elaborating, reflective and prescient *Thought*. This is what is here, the magnificent living issue of Penn's dreams and pains and care!

But what we have rather to inquire about, what we have to hope for, is in our attainment of Penn's *moral ideal*; the great principles and moralities of a State free in every sense, in the personal, moral and mental independence of every individual. And, above all, in the virtue, public and private, which he clearly saw and prophesied must be the corner stone, or the vital force, of free institutions. As I think of this, it occurs to me irresistibly, that, were he back

among us, the Founder might not be altogether as well pleased as we might think. Two hundred years is a long time! The Idealist is apt to be impatient. Is it certain that he would be satisfied with the progress his province has made? The wealth, the material expansion, would be a marvel, I have said; but Penn was quite capable of looking through and beyond all this, and enquiring whether in those subtler and finer attainments we have made a corresponding advance.

At this point there are always, I fear, disappointment and surprise waiting on the study of history. Truth moves, no doubt, with the irresistible power of these vast glaciers, mountains of ice, that once ploughed over the whole northern slope of this continent, scoping out lake beds, channelling rivers, and scoring with their eternal autographs the granite rocks. But, alas, it seems, also, to move almost as slowly. It even gives an interest to the past to find how alike men are, now and in almost the remotest civilized times. But it seems strange, too, that generation after generation passes, century after century, and the obstinate substance of human character appears to mollify and refine hardly faster than the geologic structure of the planet. I half fear that Penn might say,—the country has changed, indeed, —*but the men?* The quarrels and cabals of his legislative body, the bickerings and backbitings, the jealousy of some, the avarice of others, on whom he had to lean,—alas, have they not more than a parallel in the doings and the characters of men in like places after two centuries? And, if back of all this, back of all the vulgarity and chicanery of

politics, and the greed of business, there is that vast, happy mass of domestic virtue and happiness, which makes no sign in the papers, but is the strength of society everywhere, so it has always been. In the days when Rome was at its worst, or Paris or London was at its worst, I suppose there was always this *substratum* of morality, simplicity and religiousness which saved society, as it saves it to-day—but which is too quiet and uneventful to have left its annals. Historians, as Carlyle complains so bitterly, have heretofore almost passed this by, and have regaled the one who supposes he is studying history, with the squabbles of kings and the vices of courts. Almost alone through biography and poetry we get glimpses of this under-current of *real* human life and find human character three or four thousand years ago, or two hundred years ago, so nearly like what it still is, that one feels as if the whole question of progress were something different from what we commonly suppose.

And yet we certainly do know more truth, we see more widely ; even, I believe, the mass of society are *better* men and women, in something like a fair proportion to the more and better they have had a chance to learn. The mass *then* were not Penns, nor even Foxes. If we could look into the mind of the average citizen of 1682 and see the ideas and principles by which it was inhabited, his thought of life, of God and his ways, of human nature, of moral duty, and compare these with the corresponding contents of a like man's mind of to-day ; if we could see how much is now settled, passed into the region of established truth and of the commonplace, which

then was visionary and questionable, we might even say the two hundred years had been time well spent. At least the world never made more progress in such a space of time. We are often misled, as I have hinted, looking into the past, by taking the utterances of its great and prescient souls as the standard of their generation's thought. See that the truth of political liberty, now as familiar to us as daily breath, was two hundred years ago, even in England, a tree new planted and struggling, needing careful nurture and protection, its broadest interpretations almost narrow beside what you and I enjoy as the normal condition of our lives; while the higher thought of mental and religious liberty was a grand but difficult ideal, for which it was still possible to die. It took, indeed, one of the greatest of wars, which you and I remember shuddering, to teach our own generation the last corollaries of the former; and of the latter creeds and sects, and many a jealousy lingering among men of differing thought, show that still we have much to learn. And yet again how much has come and gone, what fetters have been broken, what barriers broken down, since the Mayflower and the Welcome tempted the troubled Atlantic to plant the seed of what we are!

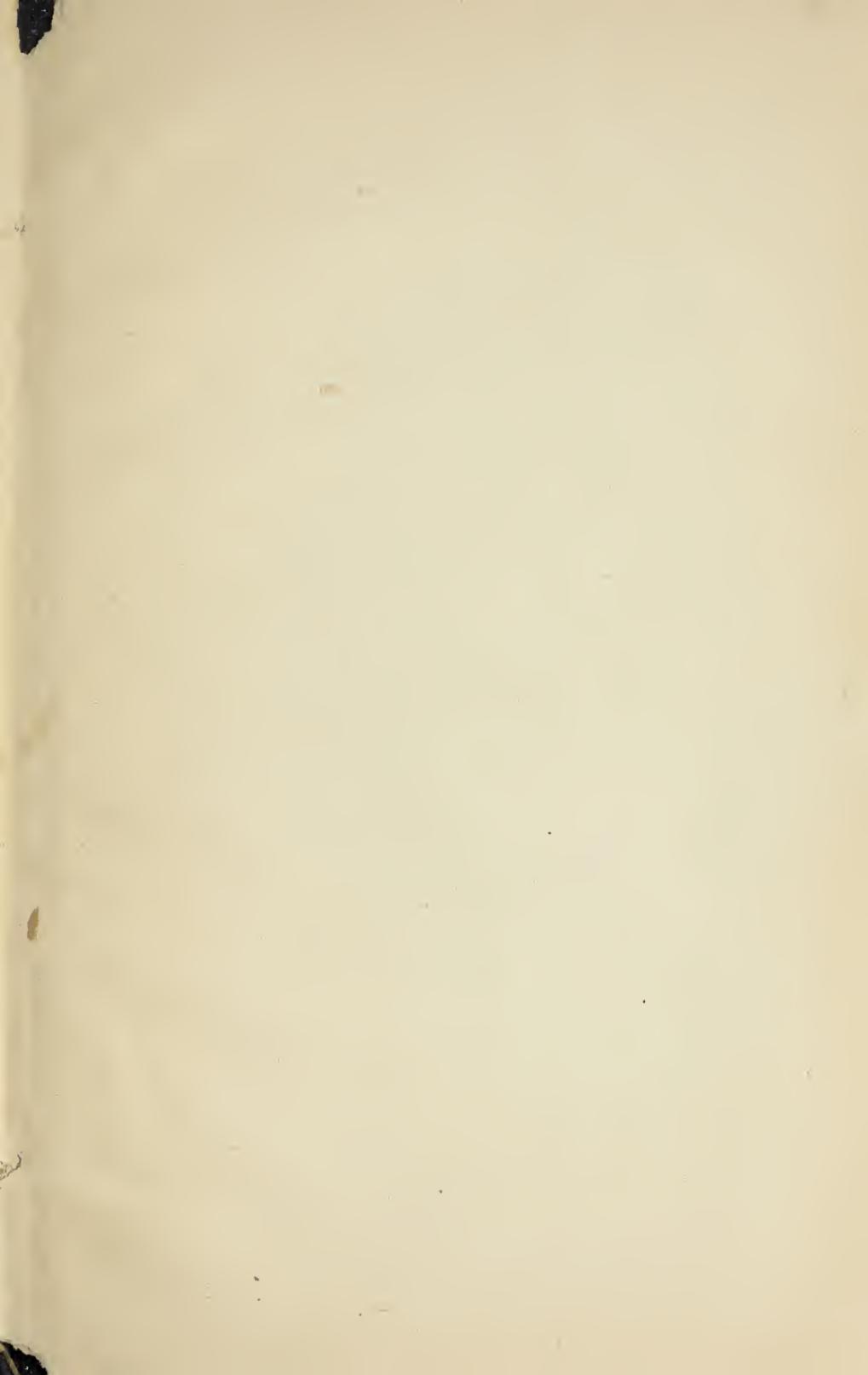
In the providence of God it was the Puritans, men of action, men of force, of short views, perhaps, and narrower purposes, but of stout hearts and strong brains, resolved, cool, clear, who fought the outward battle of two-fold liberty and won its victory. The Quakers were rather the seers of those days, its prophets crying aloud, often things grotesque and absurd, yet also supplying many a strain

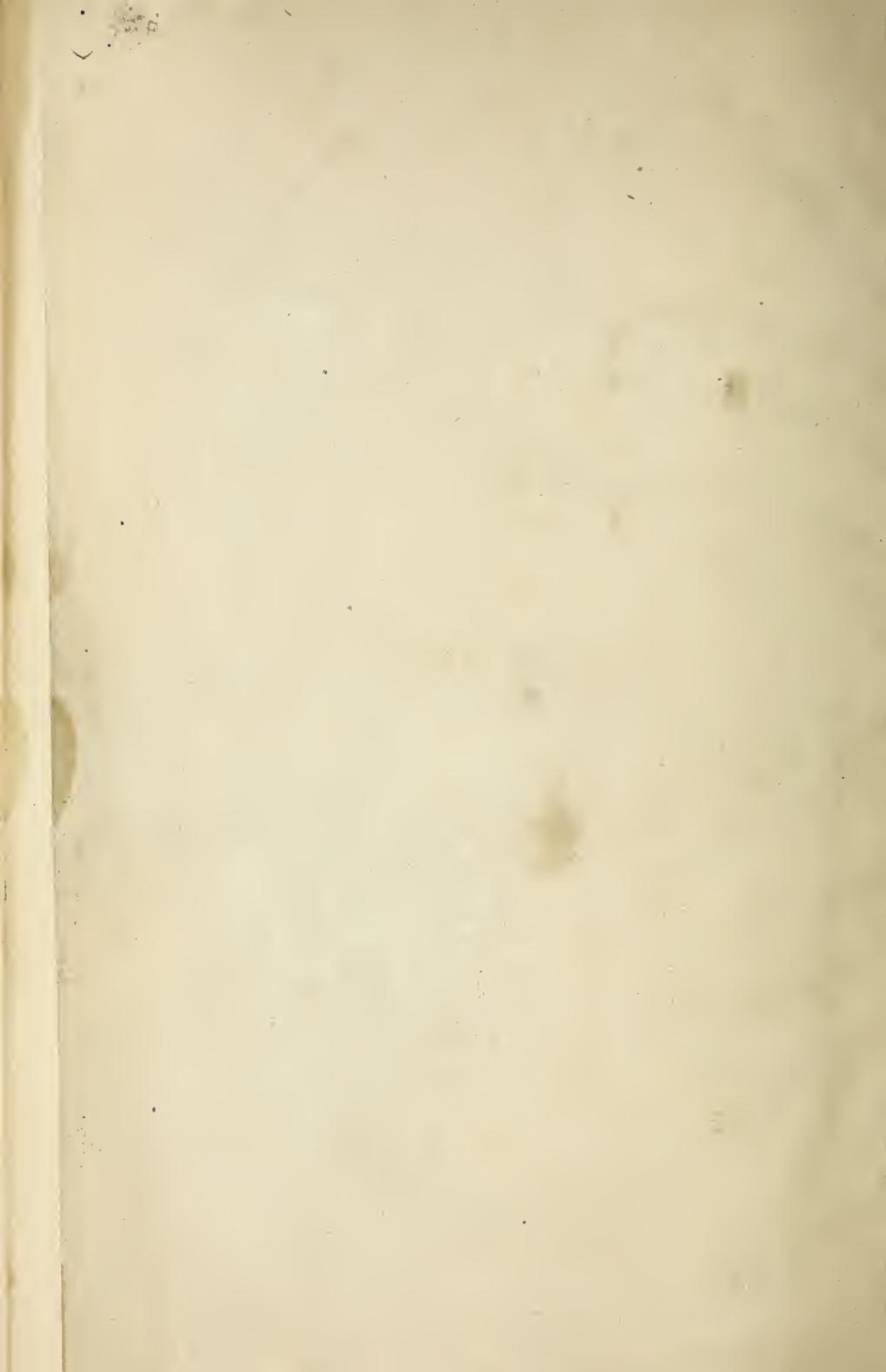
of ideal thought, and from whose patient sufferings we cannot tell how much was contributed, as by the martyrdom of Stephen to the conversion of Paul, to educate the sentiment of their time. Not all were fanatics ; although their greatest, beautiful conception of Divine guidance was too subtile and immense for those days and who can interpret it in these ? But even Mary Dyer and her fellow martyrs on Boston Common died not quite in vain ; and if the principles of Fox and Penn stiffened into a cultus as rigid, and even more so, than that of Puritanism, it has produced a type of character and individual examples of manhood and womanhood, staunch, pure, serene, of singular vision for moral truth, and marvellous consistency in abiding by it, of which its inheritors ought to be generously proud and to cherish forever. The greatest woman of America, whose fragile presence but whose massive thought and searching eloquence are among the choicest incidental associations even of these walls, was a genuine product of Quakerism, and showed what fruit it could bear, as her name reminds us that the practical culture of her sect is a definite witness, not to be gainsaid, to one of the greatest of social truths ; to what human society was meant to be and will be when its most radical reform, still too slowly moving, is accomplished, and the true equality of all its members, without regard to the physical distinction of sex, is attained and established.

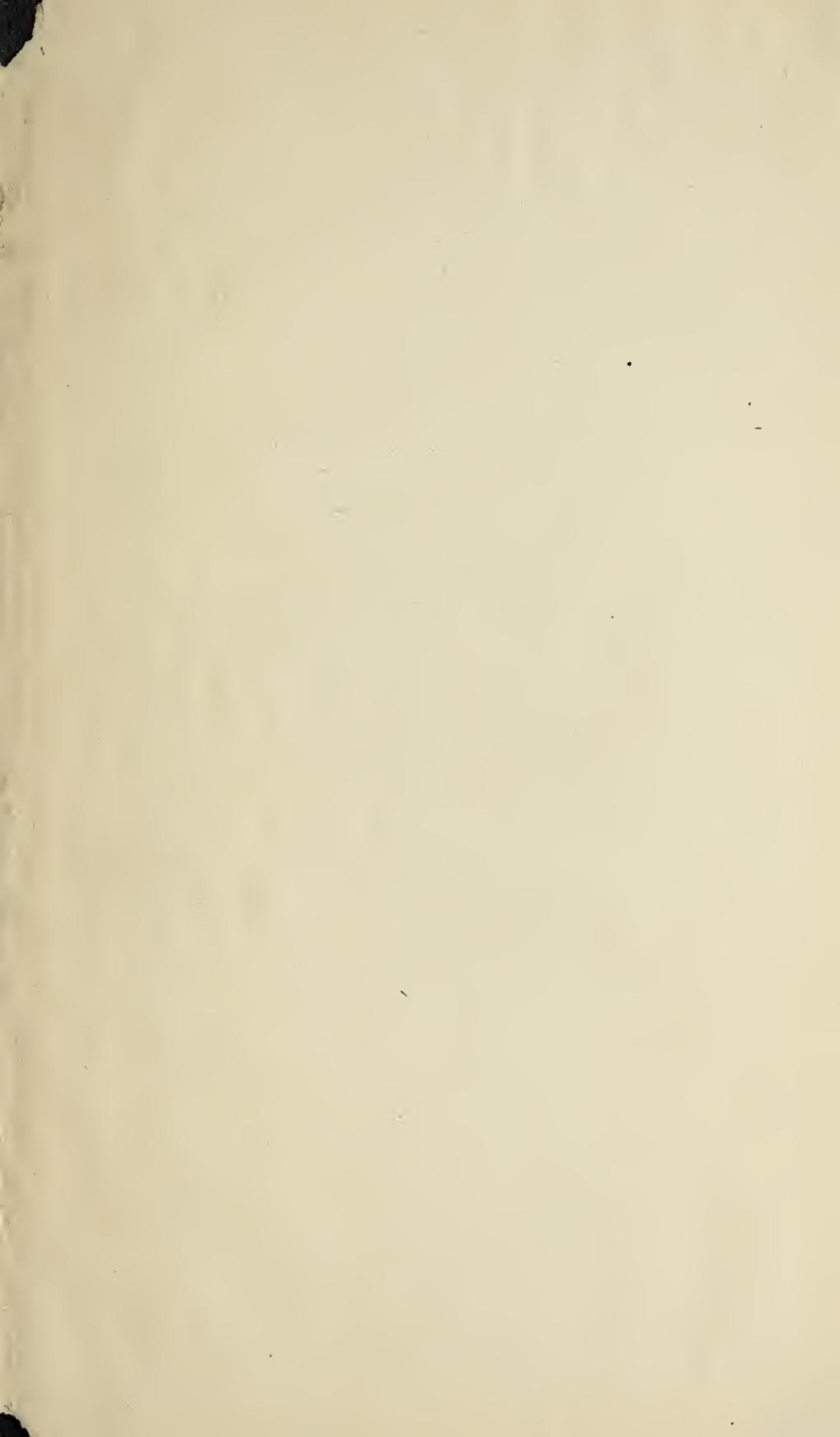
The fine ideal of William Penn went the way of all things human when it sought to realize itself ; but in furnishing a home for such principles as those to which his peculiar people have borne witness, and

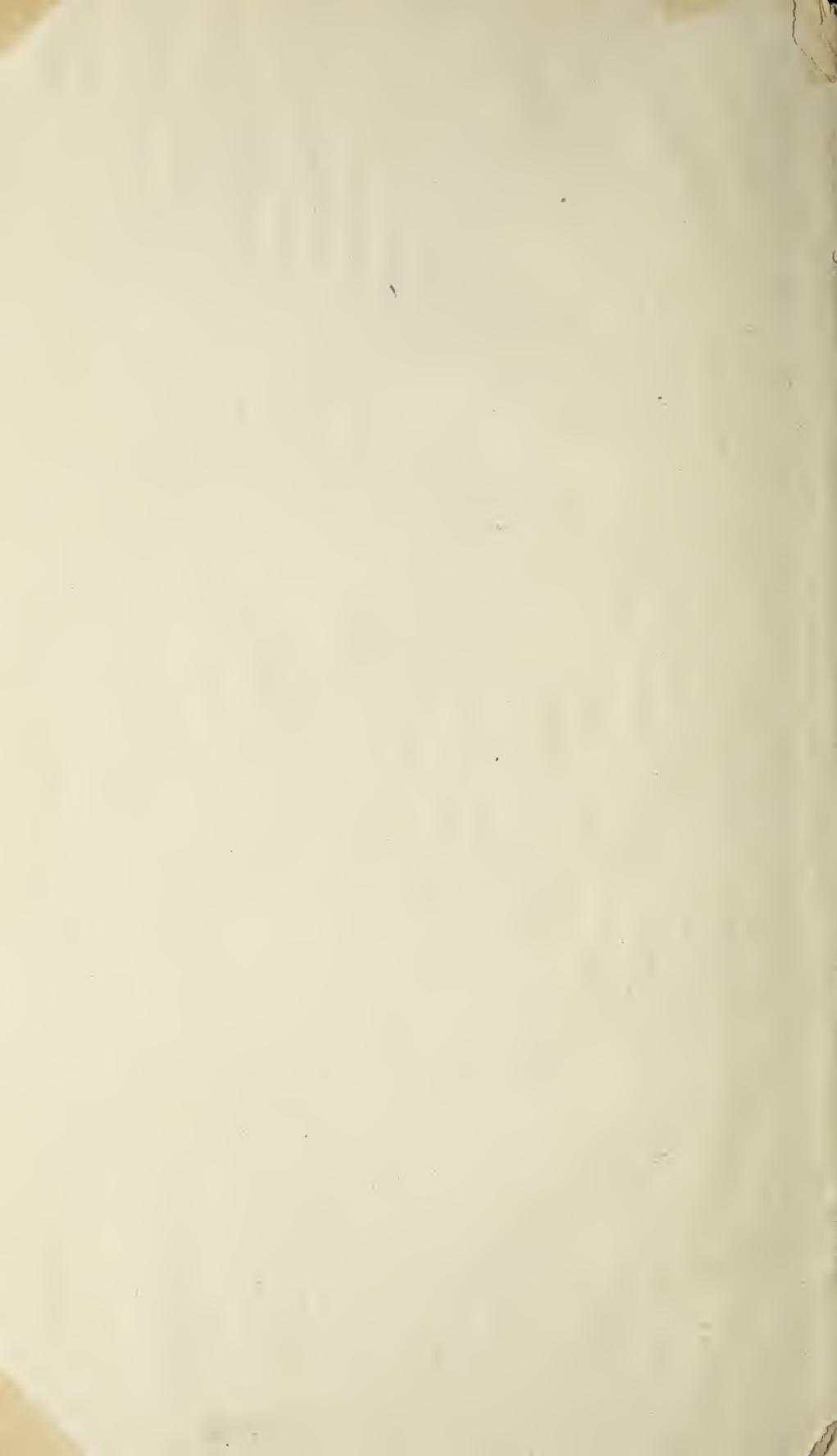
a theatre for their practical maintenance and test, he did an inestimable service to his kind, and to our nation.

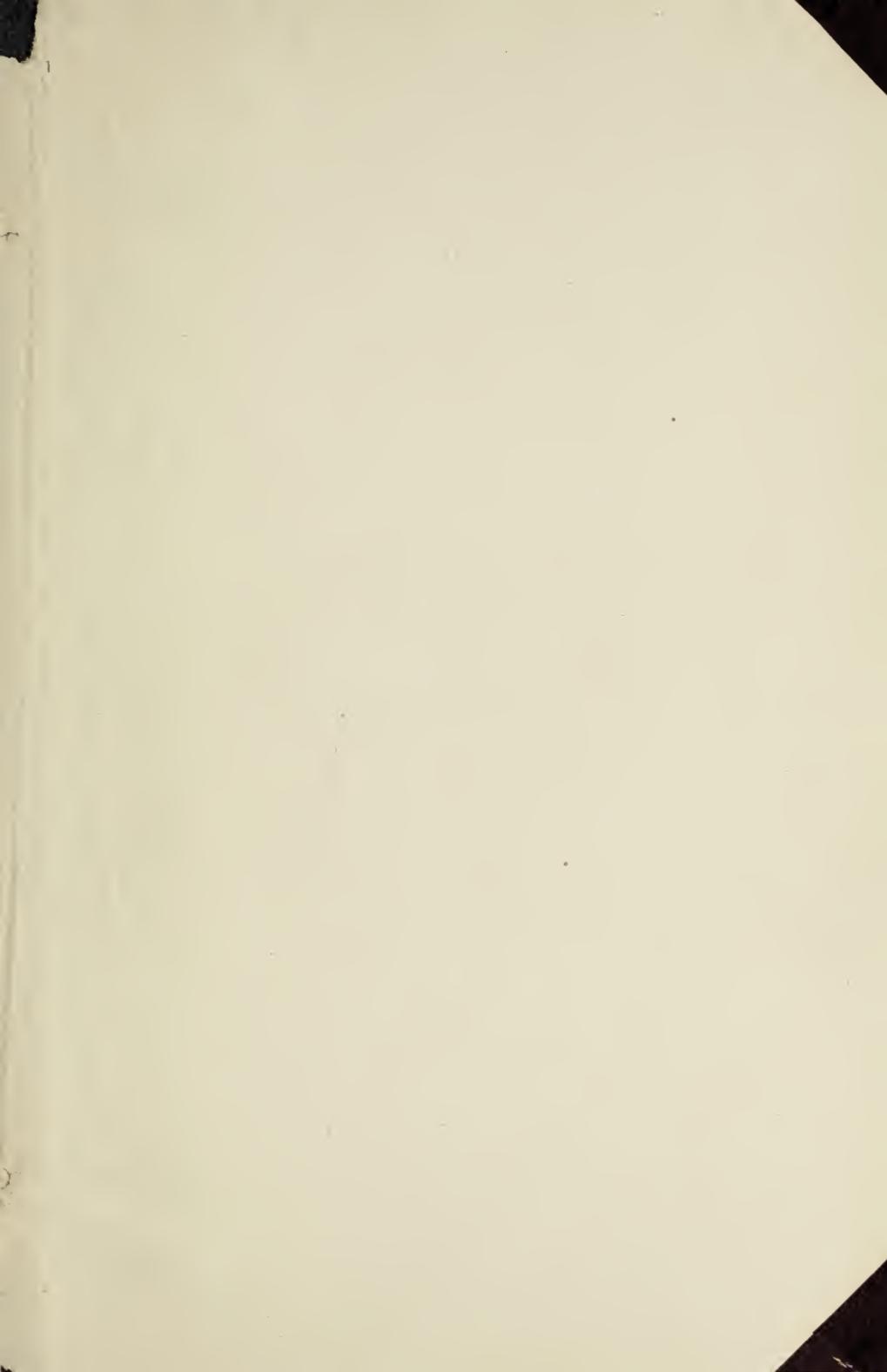
Conscience, equality, peace, temperance, unworldliness, patience, serenity, trust in God and the truth ;—to have planted a people whose function it has been for two centuries to bear testimony to these truths, to mould them into character and to offer them an example to the world, this is a service which should make the name of WILLIAM PENN imperishable.











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